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French Studies at the Open University: pointers to the future

Jim Coleman and Elodie Vialleton

Part-time study is an obvious way for students to carry on earning while learning, keeping costs down and providing alternative routes into education. Part-time students now make up one third of all undergraduates. Giving a fairer deal to part-time students could raise our skills base and improve social mobility while actually saving the Government money.

David Willetts, now Minister for Universities and Science, in *Policy Review* 23/01/2010 at http://www.policyreview.co.uk/articles.php?article_id=70

At the Open University, French is taught by the largest but least conventional Department of Languages in the United Kingdom. Numbers of language students are now approaching 10,000 a year, which translates into over 3,000 FTEs (Full Time Equivalent student numbers). In terms of recruitment, whether actual students or FTEs, the Open University (OU) is also the largest French department in the UK. This chapter describes our distinctive and innovative approach to teaching French, and our related research activities. It opens by setting language learning in the context of supported distance education, and concludes by proposing wider inter-university collaboration in the context of globalising higher education and falling UK interest in degree-level language study.

Principles of supported distance learning at the Open University

By the time the Open University moved into languages, it had already demonstrated the effectiveness of supported distance learning, and its ability to help large numbers of disparate and geographically scattered students to achieve their educational ambitions. The Open University's mission has always been distinctive: being open to people, places, methods and ideas brings challenges unfamiliar to conventional, residential universities. Social inclusiveness means that around 10,000 of the OU's students are disabled in some way, while around 2,500 are in prison without access to computers and the internet. Soldiers in Afghanistan or diplomats on overseas postings face distractions very different from those of traditional, full-time students, and learners without a readily available peer group to provide advice and mutual reassurance require distinctive forms of support, whatever their domain of study.

The OU's courses are open to all, including those unable or unwilling to participate in tutorials, so the quality and nature of the learning materials are more important than in traditional universities. All of the many functions fulfilled in the classroom by the teacher are therefore met by incorporating the 'teacher's voice' in the materials themselves, which are created and repeatedly revised through developmental testing and external review before being made available to students. In a face-to-face classroom, the occasional gaffe or muddled explanation can easily be retrieved, but this is not the case where a print run of several thousand is involved, and explains in part why delivering distance higher education requires high upfront investment. It also explains why OU courses are widely regarded as an international benchmark, and

frequently pirated or photocopied by other institutions. All materials result from a team effort: multiple inputs ensure consistent quality (and perhaps a rather unvarying ‘voice’) across courses, and although individual and even idiosyncratic ideas may well be adopted, it is no place for *prima donnas*.

Course books – which remain central to the OU’s approach to supported distance learning – are complemented by audio, video and computer-based materials, and the module’s website brings together all the resources provided within the Moodle VLE (Virtual Learning Environment). Through this single access point, students can see and hear the teaching and assessment materials, use other internal and external resources, and participate in asynchronous and synchronous networking with their tutors and fellow-students. The discussion forums, both for individual tutor groups and for the whole course, compensate to an extent for the lack of campus-based classmates. Requiring no more than clear ground rules and occasional light-touch monitoring, such forums attract thousands of posts and provide demonstrably effective peer support and encouragement. At Christmas 2009, students on L192 Beginners’ French even organised an online French pantomime.

There are no admission requirements for OU courses, although plentiful advice and, for languages, tasters are available. Consequently, student profiles are very much wider than in conventional, residential universities where mature students remain the exception. Students tend to be older – although the fastest-growing sector is under-25s – and while many already hold a degree-level qualification, many others have no experience of post-compulsory or of higher education (Coleman & Furnborough, 2010).

Not only are all tutorials optional, but they are also infrequent: the model allows only some 20 hours of group tuition for each module. Tutors, all of whom receive extensive initial and ongoing professional development, also provide very detailed individual feedback on compulsory scheduled assignments throughout the course. Samples of each tutor’s formative and summative assessment are regularly monitored to ensure that criteria are respected, and that supportive and accurate feedback is provided in an equitable way. Where any module has a population of several hundred (Beginners’ French typically attracts 1,400 students a year), such quality assurance is essential.

Despite a recent move to encouraging students to aim at a degree or other qualification, rather than just successful completion of the current module, recruitment and registration still apply only to a single module. Many enrol just for the learning, rather than its certification, and there is no automatic sequence or progression. Whereas, in conventional universities, the vast majority of students, once launched on a particular pathway, will dutifully follow it for the next three or four years, the OU needs to devote considerable attention and resources to both initial recruitment and to retention: only a positive learning experience will lead a student to complete the current module and register for the next. With 70% of OU students in full-time employment, motivation and persistence on their part and effective teaching and support on ours are essential to keep them studying. In some respects, our role is akin to adult education or university language centres: not every student is seeking a formal qualification, many are following a course for interest or pleasure and have no intention of taking it further, and numbers are higher at lower levels. However, this

does not mean that courses are not challenging, and the inclusion of content alongside language skills puts OU language courses in the same category as specialist rather than non-specialist provision in other universities.

French at the Open University

The four French modules which the OU currently offers (described in Table 1) attract some 3,500 students a year, all of whom are part-time and distance-taught. The modules, which take students from beginner to degree level over four years of study, integrate the four language skills with the study of contemporary culture and society in France and the French-speaking world.

Table 1: French modules available at the Open University

Module Code	L192	L120	L211	L310
Title	<i>Bon Départ</i>	<i>Ouverture</i>	<i>Envol</i>	<i>Mises au point</i>
Level	Beginners	Intermediate	Upper intermediate	Advanced
CEFR	A2	B1	B2	C1
Credits	30	30	60	60
Dates	Nov-Oct	Feb-Oct	Feb-Oct	Feb-Oct
Duration (Teaching)	11 months	8 months	8 months	8 months
Current cost	£480	£480	£1165	£850
Qualification	Certificate in French		Diploma in French	

In addition to the distance courses, all students may take LXR122 *Action in French*, a one-week residential school at Caen university for beginners, false beginners and intermediate learners, which earns 10 credits. A compulsory residential school in Caen is embedded in the upper intermediate module; students who are unable to travel take part in an online ‘Alternative Learning Experience’ which delivers the same learning outcomes.

Two principles which operate from the start are

- development of all four language skills
- integration of language skills with ‘content’.

This means that those who complete courses up to and including degree-level (L310) will have a knowledge of French language and the society and culture of contemporary France comparable to those from any other UK university: external examiners confirm that this is the case, and indeed that OU students frequently attain higher levels in both linguistic and cultural domains. The learning outcomes for L310, for example, include academic writing, critical and analytical skills, and intercultural competence, while the six themes are

- *History*: The end of the French Empire; a profile of General de Gaulle; Revolution and republicanism.
- *Multicultural France*: Interviews with the writer Azouz Begag; an exploration of secularism (*Laïcité*) and its role in French identity; immigration and identity through the prism of literature.

- *The media*: The regional daily *Sud Ouest* – production and presentation of the news; French radio, listener participation, consumer issues; television, the internet, globalisation, and celebrity culture.
- *The arts in France*: The influence of *la bande dessinée* in France; the national *Fête de la musique*; the state of the Arts.
- *Science and technology*: The *Cité des sciences et de l'industrie*, science and the public; a profile of two French oceanography museums; scientific endeavour the French way.
- *Expression and identity in the French-speaking world*: The literatures of Québec; the Caribbean and French-speaking Africa; the French-speaking world.

Successful completion of the two Level 1 modules (L192 + L120) currently leads to the award of a Certificate in French. Adding the Level 2 and Level 3 modules (L211 and L310) earns a Diploma in French. No Single Honours degree is offered, but students can obtain the BA (Honours) in Modern Language Studies by achieving 360 credits across two languages (which may include English). With the OU, students can attain a degree, at today's prices, for below £5,000, despite the impact of ELQ, the previous Government's withdrawal of state funding for students pursuing an Equal or Lower Qualification than they already hold.

The pedagogy

OU French modules make selective use of technological tools adapted to particular skills and learning outcomes, and offer a combination of independent study and support through work with peers and tutors.

Like almost all OU courses, the French modules are delivered through blended learning. Study materials are composed of a blend of media (course books, CDs, DVD-ROMs, a dedicated website) which allows students to learn and practise each of the four skills through the most appropriate medium, and which helps to accommodate a variety of learning styles and study preferences and gives students more choice. For example, books are preferred for text-based activities, and they are easy to carry around, DVD-ROMs are used to deliver materials based on audio clips and videos without requiring fast internet access to download them, while an online environment gives more flexibility to provide activities based on mixed media and up-to-date news, content and tools. The module website brings together all the components of a module in a format that is accessible from any computer or mobile device with internet access, and gives students access to communication tools. It is therefore also the space that forms a virtual community by bringing students together and allowing them to interact in real time or asynchronously, either for social purposes or to work together.

Indeed, one of the main challenges of learning a language independently and at a distance is the acquisition of skills which depend on interaction. This is achieved through the use of technology. Asynchronous online activities are designed to get students to take part in collaborative tasks in French. For example, in the upper intermediate French module, each thematic unit includes a number of optional group tasks which students perform in a discussion forum. They get to write a film review collaboratively, or to collect and organise arguments and examples together before

writing an individual essay. These tasks do not take place in real time and they are written tasks but they do get students to practise using French structures to share or ask for information and to negotiate meaning. The use of teleconferencing in all OU French courses adds an extra dimension by allowing students to practise these skills in real time and in speaking. Activities for synchronous and asynchronous online tasks are carefully designed as an integral part of a module. Some are meant to be used by groups of students working autonomously, and some are led by tutors as part of the tuition. Students are also free to use teleconferencing and discussion forums on their own as part of peer-support groups to support each other, to practise their speaking skills or just to chat.

Whilst most of the students' work is done independently, its success depends on the strong student support available as part of each module. In this the role of the Associate Lecturers who act as individual tutors to OU students is instrumental. They deliver tutorials, some of which take place face-to-face and some online through teleconferencing. They also support their tutorial group in tutor group discussion forums which are used as virtual asynchronous classrooms which bridge the gap between tutorials. Finally they provide individualised support by phone or email and through the extensive feedback sent to students about each of the frequent compulsory assignments that punctuate the course of a module.

Research

When it comes to research, French is integrated with the other foreign languages (German, Spanish, Italian, Chinese, Welsh, English for Academic Purposes) now offered by the OU. A strategic decision was taken in 2001 to focus the research effort of the Department of Languages on a single domain. Although many individuals have published, and a few continue to publish, in areas related to cultures and literatures, the predominant output has been on foreign language learning. Given the long-standing OU expertise in distance education, and in particular in how new technologies are most effectively used in support of learning and teaching, it was natural to focus principally on what is known as e-learning or online learning of languages. And while research also continues in areas such as study abroad, intercultural narratives, language motivation in UK secondary schools, and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, the largest body of research, with around 200 publications since 2001, has been devoted to computer-mediated communication (CMC), both within language learning and as a generic domain, including online cultures, multimodality and new research methodologies.

Many of the issues addressed by the Open Languages Research Group - including overcoming distance in language learning, good pedagogic practices, autonomy and self-management, affect, new technologies within a sociocultural paradigm, alternative tools and affordances, anxiety and motivation in online conferences, and tutor training – have recently been summarised in Coleman and Furnborough (2010), in an article which also shows that the same learning outcomes can be achieved by online tuition as through face-to-face classes. New initiatives seek to establish, from online tutorials, a digital corpus of spoken learner language.

International recognition of Open Languages in this increasingly important area of research has been evidenced by invited plenaries and peer-reviewed contributions to

conferences across the world. In RAE 2008, given the continued absence of an Applied Linguistics Sub-panel, language research was submitted as part of a 77-strong cross-Faculty entry to Education, which saw the OU's Centre for Research in Education and Educational Technology (CREET) ranked third among educational research centres in the UK.

Much of the CMC research, while underpinned by educational and applied linguistic theory (Coleman et al. in press), feeds directly into teaching, where Languages are among the most innovative departments at the OU. Since language learning depends on tutor-student and student-student interaction, lessons learned in French or other foreign language classes can be transferred to any course where tuition relies on interaction. Cross-language cooperation means that an initiative taken by a single language course can be implemented at scale across all languages and levels, benefiting all 10,000 language students.

This may be one reason why language courses repeatedly feature, in the annual survey, among those evincing highest levels of student satisfaction across the whole OU, which has itself been in the top three UK universities each year since the National Student Survey was launched in 2005.

Appreciation of the OU's approach to the learning of languages and cultures is also evidenced on an international scale. Sample units are made available free of charge both via OpenLearn (<http://openlearn.open.ac.uk/>), which passed one million visitors in January 2010, and via iTunes U (<http://www.open.ac.uk/itunes/>). The Open University was globally the first university to achieve twenty million iTunes downloads, a total which had reached 24 million by August 2010. The top four 'tracks' are beginners Spanish, French, Chinese and German, with two further language units in the top ten downloads.

The Future: a worsening climate

In the context of cuts in Higher Education funding which are anticipated to be greater than any experienced since the Great Depression of the 1930s, it is unrealistic to think that French Studies will be immune from change. Among conventional universities, there has existed a widely used but tacit distinction between 'selectors' – those institutions whose reputation guarantees more applicants than the places available – and 'recruiters', who need to actively attract enough students to fill their places. At disciplinary level, the distinction hardly operates: those with substantial French programmes are virtually all selectors, and most (with Portsmouth a signal exception) from the Russell Group.

Unprecedented pressure on places for 2010 admission and Government funding constraints herald an era when, overall, demand substantially exceeds supply. But there is little reassurance for languages in general and French in particular.

Back in 2000, the Nuffield Report on Languages (The Nuffield Foundation 2000) already found that 'University language departments are closing, leaving the sector in deep crisis'. That same year, 347,007 students took a French GCSE, and 18,221 a French A level. Since then, while overall modern languages numbers have fallen by 9.4% at A level and 38.4% at GCSE, French has plummeted by 24.0% and 48.8% respectively. The 2009-2010 declines alone are, at 3.4% and 6.0%, showing no sign at

all of levelling off. Yet, as Worton (2009) noted, and despite continuing closures of courses and departments, the university modern languages sector is not behaving as if it were in a critical position, but clinging to past sectarian divisions of language, specialism, foundation date or position in league tables rather than working together to maximise chances of surviving or even thriving.

French cannot afford to ignore the political climate in the UK, which remains hostile to languages (Coleman 2009). Indeed, the coalition Government elected in 2010 is arguably pursuing an even more strictly monolingualist agenda than its predecessor – as evidenced by the immediate scrapping of the Diploma in Languages and International Communication and the abandonment of Sir Jim Rose's recommendation for compulsory language provision in primary schools. These actions contradict Willetts' call for students to undertake study abroad and to offer more language skills. Referring to a recent report (CBI 2010), he said: "British companies want to export abroad but one of the problems they raise with us is that British students don't have foreign languages and an experience of living in another country."

Modern Languages at university level in the UK are already an élitist subject, and in conventional universities further socio-economic concentration appears inevitable. While we recognise that many of our own students are also drawn from privileged sectors of society, the OU's critical education and social inclusion philosophy requires that we challenge such a situation.

We have already (Coleman 2009) stressed the need to challenge the simplistic messages of the media. Press coverage of Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg's use of Dutch, Spanish and German in June 2010 is, sadly, typical of the media construction of multilingualism as freakish, problematic and unnecessary. In *The Times*, Roger Boyes recalled that Edward Heath's use of French 'was held against him' for 'trying too hard to please the foreigners', that Tony Blair 'thought it wise to play down any linguistic skill' and that, for UK politicians, speaking other European languages is taboo in case it suggests 'politically unsound interest in European integration'. Kate Connolly in *The Guardian* mentioned his spokeswoman's German nationality, and portrayed Clegg's use of German to Germans not as natural or courteous, but as sneaky: 'There's no better way to flatter a German than to speak his or her tongue'.

Connolly implies that Clegg's linguistic skills result not from choice and long-term effort, but from the serendipity of a Dutch mother, a Spanish wife, a school trip to Munich and working as a ski instructor in Austria. Sarah Sands in *The Independent* takes the same tack: 'Clegg is more connected to European blood lines than the Royal Family'. She recognises that 'a mastery of foreign languages is regarded by most of us with admiration – and suspicion', and even argues that 'The Philistinism towards foreign languages is bad enough. Worse is the sense that it is boastful and somehow unpatriotic to use a foreign language'. Unfortunately, she undermines her own argument with the statement that 'there is no need for an English person to learn another language'. The usual xenophobic verbs stand in for speaking a foreign language: for Sands, 'Clegg gabbled about the mist in Berlin', while Paul Moss on the BBC's *World Tonight* spoke of Clegg 'jabbering away with the locals in their own language'.

Beyond occasional lip service, there is no real evidence that Government will challenge the widespread if fallacious beliefs that 'English is enough' and that language study is an irrelevance. If there is some evidence that some adults and undergraduates in non-language disciplines continue to recognise the importance of languages, the continuing shrinking of the pool from which specialist undergraduates are drawn shows no sign of slowing.

The future: new models of higher education

The current Universities Minister, David Willetts, and Business Secretary, Vince Cable, have referred (20 July 2010) rather dismissively to the 'Club Med' model of conventional universities, where comfortably-off students who have mostly just left secondary education look to a single provider to offer the full spread of education, accommodation and other facilities in a highly intensive, once-in-a-lifetime experience not without elements of a holiday village. They explicitly support a more diverse provision which includes part-time and lifelong education. A year before his election, the Prime Minister, David Cameron, chose the OU as the venue for a speech on change and modernisation, citing it as an example of 'the success that change and modernisation can bring':

Respected the world over, you are a demonstration that in this country, yes we have some of the best old universities in the world, but also some of the best innovation in the world such as we have through The Open University.

Subsequently, in July 2010, the OU's Vice Chancellor was one of four to accompany Cameron, Willetts and Cable on a major mission to India. It can come as no surprise if Government in future backs a different model of higher education, incorporating distance, online and/or part-time elements.

The globalisation and marketisation of higher education are equally inescapable. Bill Gates echoed the UK Ministers in suggesting that HE, 'except for the parties, needs to be less place-based'. He claimed in August 2010 that, within five years, 'place-based learning will be five times less important than it is today'. Gareth Williams, Emeritus Professor at the Institute of Education Centre for Higher Education Studies, also believes 'higher education may increasingly be delivered via distance learning' (*Times Higher Education* 12 August 2010, p.6).

As the 2001 benchmark statement on modern languages (<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/honours/languages.pdf>) and a recent guide to university teaching in modern languages (Coleman and Klapper 2005) spelt out, and the 2009 Worton Report (HEFCE 2009) reiterated, French is part of a very diverse sector, embracing literary, cultural, film and linguistic studies, as well as providing language training and cultural insights to both a dwindling number of specialists and a growing number of non-specialists. Like religions, languages have historically focused much more on what divides them than on common interests. At a time of monolingualism and budget cuts, it behoves us all to look at ways of working together more effectively for the good of all.

Departments face a choice between sitting complacently like shipwreck survivors in a lifeboat, with the strongest eating the weakest from time to time as numbers dwindle; or taking action at a political, societal and pedagogical level. Currently, too many

disdain to argue publicly and to decision-makers the practical value (dare one say 'impact'?) of studying languages. Few challenge the media messages that English is enough and that other languages are a problem rather than a resource. And collaborative teaching initiatives are few and far between, despite examples such as *Netzwerk Deutsch*, a beginner's German course based on OU learning materials and offered by a number of partner universities.

The Open University has real and recent experience of the value of working together, and collaborates through choice and not necessity. It has unparalleled expertise in distance learning, in online tuition, in managing synchronous and asynchronous computer-mediated communication, in training colleagues to teach online, and in delivering quality learning at scale and worldwide. We welcome from colleagues anywhere proposals which might protect and enhance national provision of French in higher education.

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